

Robert Smithson and the American Landscape

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INTRODUCTION

Grounding Art History

Painting, sculpture and architecture are finished, but the art habit continues.

Robert Smithson, 1966[†]

Although expressed at a time in U.S. history recognized for its social upheaval, volcanic civic disobedience, and an explosive shift in social values and belief systems, the sentiments in the above epigraph have been a recurrent phenomenon in artistic practice throughout the twentieth century. Yet despite its intimacy with the conventions of modernism – and in that sense hedging his bet – its author nonetheless was part of a certain artistic sector that did shift during the 1960s and in ways that dramatically changed the visual look of our cultural terrain. If that was not enough, even stronger things need to be said about the author’s role in the changing tectonics of art talk – the subsequent developments that have since surfaced under the banners of New/Radical Art History or Visual Culture. For the artist’s extensive writings not only played a significant role in establishing a different theoretical model and methodological approach for an appreciation of a then-emerging “postmodernism” but also helped establish a change of guideposts for interpellating culture at large.

Then, and since the 1960s, accounts of this shifting cultural landscape have ranged from positive narratives of a time of diversity and opportunity to more centrist images of indecisiveness in the face of a dizzying plurality to more extreme, even apocalyptic, premonitions of deterioration in aesthetic standards. One politically informed view of the heterogeneity that sustained the early years of what we still begrudgingly refer to as postmodernism told it this way: “The ideological confusions of current art, euphemistically labeled a ‘healthy pluralism’

by art promoters, stems from the collapsed authority of the modernist paradigm.”² This particular materialist view also carried an addendum: not only had the modernist aesthetic framework collapsed, another art habit had arrived. A quarter-century later one should add the following: despite its unraveling the modernist paradigm, has in no sense of the term, disappeared quietly into the night.

As protagonists in a culture war, the competing sides sought to recognize in a diversifying contemporary art field a conceptual position that would account for an emerging culture that in significant ways coincided with the much broader political crisis. And the earthworks by Robert Smithson have been given a pivotal role in that continuing quest. In turn, responses to the artist’s earthworks, in general, have varied in meaning and significance, and although limited as a truism, perhaps it is still worth saying that the psychological response to any artwork differs from one viewer to another. Yet, in the sense that a viewer is always already bound to a prior discourse, established narratives on art play a powerful role in anyone’s appreciation of art. Although I wish to defend the democratization of aesthetic consumption that has occurred since the 1960s – in terms of the growth in the interdisciplinary approaches to art’s always-incomplete and politically negotiable character – nevertheless, the very choices or interpretive moves one makes in acknowledging or ignoring a variety of often (in)visible associations matters, especially when dispersed across multiple identities.

To date, narratives on Smithson’s earthworks celebrate a variety of the ways the artist effectively challenged the hegemony of modernism. Yet the discourse has also done so, as if the art celebrated entailed the denial of specific interests oriented toward a form of capital. If indicative of anything, the gap or discrepancy between the vast amount of culture talk on the artist’s earthworks and the virtual lack of any of that analysis dealing with his art form as a visual component of a political economy is surely, in part, the strength of conventional wisdom – the symbolic power cultural practice accrues through repeated assertions. Yet as Smithson argued it, “all legitimate art deals with limits. Fraudulent art feels that it has no limits. The trick is to locate those elusive limits. You are always running against those limits, but somehow they never show themselves.”³ The same can be said for the ongoing art historical accounts of his earthworks.

A persistent drive in this book – in recognition of fine art as part of a culture industry⁴ – is to refocus the theoretical boundaries currently framing the historical accounts of the art by Smithson. In addition, my methodological approach accepts the fact that the radiating rays defining any historical terrain are, at best, compositional devices marked as much by the context of the disciplinary vantage point as it is by a vanishing past that no longer exists. The book's historical vanishing point is the post-1950 environmental movement – defined here as a grassroots cultural shift of concerns and practices out to protect nature against the damages caused by a particular version of human industrious activity. On the other hand, with many an industrialist currently claiming “We are all environmentalists now,” the lever of this book – in redeploing the overburden left abandoned in the ongoing discourse on art onto the fulcrum of Smithson's artistic significance is meant to reassess the current version of economic responsibility touted by the recent arrival of the Dow Jones Sustainability Index.⁵

In reminding the discursive boundaries defining the art by Smithson, this book only tangentially includes the responses of those who have based their view of his art on the theoretical version of creativity resembling some kind of a nonephemeral origination – or its methodological sibling, a history of the significance of his earthworks merely in terms of its relationship with other significant art.⁶ In addition, as a monograph of sorts, this book in effect, produces an artistic subject for the specific earthworks addressed. But it also is not the kind of art history out to locate the biographical demons of Robert's youth in order to establish the autonomy of artistic intentionality and as if it is *the* hidden language behind the art.

Certain familial references do provide guideposts that give insight to the artist's subsequent earthworks. For example, his detours into a not-so-garden-of-Eden approach to landscaping has its affinities to the artist's grandfather, Charles Smithson – “the Englishman who did plaster ceilings in the New York subways, the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Natural History and . . . one hundred of the finest churches in the United States.”⁷ Smithson's uncle also introduced a young Robert to the world of crystallography and cartography, and both disciplines came to play a vital role in the artist's subsequent earthworks. Although such biographical associations can throw light on the rhetoric of artistic intention, the familial narrative

always already contains a variety of civic dimensions – the political economy that legislates the nature (and significance) of any identity. In that sense, what was the youth exposed to with regard to his grandfather's occupations? What kind of value system comes along with the discipline of crystallography? What is registered in the look of a map? Then there was the more specific context: Robert's upper middle class background, his uncle's place of employment, and the Hammond Map Company and its involvement in the vastly accelerated post WWII domestic program of topographic and geologic mapping of mineral resources in the United States.

Years later, there would also be the state of the culture industry that the artist spent a great deal of time coming to terms with and, in part, distancing himself from. A constant topic in Smithson's writings – and subsequent art historical accounts – was his battle with "absolute categories,"⁸ his refusal of "exaggerated self confidence, exaggerated belief in the possibility to control, exaggerated belief in the possibility for harmony and thus the exaggerated cultivation of the pure, the perfect and the timeless."⁹ Yet, the artist's writings also confirm he was not out to critique any and every conceivable type of coherence or closure, but a specific paradigmatic spin on that habit – the exaggerated modernist hubris attached to *artworks*. And *earthworks* was the term the artist borrowed in his all-out suburban assault on that practice.¹⁰

As the literature on these art terms posits, the conceptual parameters distinguishing earthworks from the modernist versions of an artwork is the former's inseparability from the site-specifics of the earth as such – that is, objects made *in* and *of* the natural environment. Nonetheless, the notion earthworks (as the term *artwork* does also) has as much to do with nature as culture. Although strategic distinctions in their own right, the categorical function in the use of both words has relied on a binary distinction between the manufactured environment (cultural materials in general) and that of the natural. Yet if one includes any type of human-factured activity as part of the natural environment – and in today's world of bio-cyber-technologies it is becoming more difficult not to – then what would not be in *and* of the natural environment? On the other hand, our current technoscientific practice has made the nature end of the axiom itself problematic; the ethical moral questions generated within the biotechnogenetic industry continuously dissolve into chaos within our current binary foundations of ontological thought – which, for some, means that the

scientific practice should stop. For many, the undecidability of the debate has put the so-called completeness and consistency of the axiomatic foundations of modern philosophical truth in jeopardy – and that perhaps the binary axiom of the nature/culture equation needs to be extended, or even superseded, in order to get past the impasse. For others, the current scientific behavior has been used to sever the very question of nature as a referent, collapsing the practice of representation into one of simulation. It is precisely here, within this conceptual quagmire, that Smithson's own reference of the term *earthworks* as "the manufacture of artificial soil"¹¹ suggests that the tactical advantages in such a distinction was also at stake for the artist.

Within the ever-expanding cottage industry on earthworks – where we, in the economy of our ongoing methodologies, desire the art to be – this book begins its art historical account of the earthwork by Robert Smithson.¹² Chapter One starts with the artist's 1967 letter to the editor of *Artforum* and its philosophical ruminations about the problems of a particular modernist version of aesthetic experience. It then looks at how the artist turned to the long-since-disparaged tradition of the picturesque-sublime as his counterpoint position. The chapter then turns to its subsequent institutional reception – how a growing number of art writers have subsequently spun the content of Smithson's response to the issue of artistic representation ("especially as it was conceived by modernism"¹³) into one that fits within a much broader more all-encompassing postmodern discourse.¹⁴ Relying on a methodology of deferral and displacement, and staged as a form of resistance to the modernist approach of art appreciation, this expanding literature has, over the course of the past several decades, developed a significant degree of cultural and symbolic capital.¹⁵

What has not changed, though, is the role economy continues to play in the postmodern versions. As a meaningful aspect in appreciating earthworks, the suffix *-work* can refer to *process*, and that emphasis has played an important role in the ongoing discourse on Smithson's art. In turn, the notion of work can also suggest the presence of an economic (or labor) component. Yet, in terms of the artist's earthworks, the site-specific boundaries of this important discursive aspect rarely get beyond references to the laborious effort on the part of Smithson in demonstrating the social production of nature as a concept. When the political ramifications of the economic element are given a more critical role, the artist's earthworks continue to be celebrated as a form

of resistance to the economics of capital, consistently underestimating the ways his earthworks recreated a concept of nature that embodied capital as material culture.

Chapter One concludes with the more recent responses, or resistance to, the postmodernization of Smithson's art. Although the more recent accounts also affirm what Smithson had to say on the matter of art criticism in general – that “the mind is always being hurled towards the outer edge”¹⁶ – these latest accounts are intent on exposing the “elusive limits” in the postmodern “taxomania” of the artist's earthworks. Nonetheless, the current strategies only reconfirm what counts as art talk and what is still unthinkable in the ongoing “recruitment of Smithson's alleged transgressive taxonomy.” What continues to be absent in the recent narratives is any sense of how the specific forms of Smithson's artistic representation of the earth as landscape were not only intimate with economic relations but also inflected with a new emerging political economy developing in that landscape. In other words, the more current positions only help restabilize the established ideological limits for appreciating the artist's “permanent place in the history of art . . . and in a manner that has been serviceable to countless artists ever since.”¹⁷

As an art historian, I feel fortunate in having been exposed to the substantial changes that have occurred in the disciplines of art history since the 1970s, including the critical investigations of the discipline itself. And I agree with the theoretical gambit that the place of significance in creativity is in the specificities of convention. And in that sense, artistic transformation – as a form of self-representation and in terms of how one's self-understanding is always a body politic, always already more than a single entity – has a civic accountability that includes a certain responsibility in one's use of creativity beyond being merely its owner. But what is often not even acknowledged (or, if acknowledged, referenced as if unfortunate) in the continuing theoretical debates over the appreciation of art is the presence of economic habits. A theoretical lens attuned to economic peculiarities in any art's mode of production continues to play an insignificant role in critical narratives on contemporary art, that is, except as a means to distance and protect the art from the economic or, if recognized in an art form, as a means to dismiss the art.

Narratives on Smithson's earthworks are no exception. Economy continues to be dumped as overburden in the methodological parameters of his art's history. In addition, the ongoing responses to the

artist's earthworks continue to act as a set of enantiomorphic mirrors that function as protective blinders around specific habits, authorizing certain representations while consistently deflecting unwanted ones. As such, even the refusal to "ground" Smithson's earthworks as a form of political economy has yet to be addressed. But if psychoanalytic theory has anything to say on the matter, unless the accumulated effects of that practice (the ambivalence at play in cultural capital) are made manifest, the compulsion to repeat the methodological conventions practiced in the art of historical representation will only continue unabated. This book, for that reason alone, treats the discourse on the artist's earthworks as a "piece of unexamined doxa."¹⁸

As Smithson suggested in 1968, "rationalism confines fiction to literary categories in order to protect its own interests or systems of knowledge. One person's 'materialism' becomes another person's 'romanticism.' I would venture to assert at this point that both . . . are the same things. Both views refer to private states of consciousness that are interchangeable . . . In a sense it becomes evident that today's materialism and romanticism share similar 'surfaces.'"¹⁹ In more current terminology, despite the major fault line that continues within aesthetic debates – modernists arguing for Smithson's creative essence in autonomous resistive terminology while postmodernists stage his platform of resistance within conventionality – the cultural frameworks serve similar ends. Both rely on a strategy for securing a freedom for (or in) art distinct from capital. But, as this book contends, once situated, as it was, within the economic ramifications of a corporate mindset, Smithson's artistic activity is anything but the kind of narratives that now sustain it.

This is not to say that the growing postmodern celebrations of Smithson's art have not taken significant steps in arguing a position for an appreciation of his art "beyond" the modernist conventions of representation. Their accounts of culture at large – in asserting, "texts do not portray a real world that exists independently of language" – are, in significant ways, neither the modernist conceptions of representation nor its methods of implementation.²⁰ Chapter One, in its analysis of this important distinction, provides the necessary groundwork for an appreciation of how this shift also occurred in the discourse on *and* in the earthworks by Smithson.

In tracking the aesthetic implications of Smithson's letter to the editor of *Artforum* and its uncanny relationship to subsequent accounts of his art, the intent is not to pry his art free of the symbolic capital

that now competes for it. Instead, the intent of Chapter One is to conscript the symbolic power of the Smithson/postmodern discourse into an interdisciplinary approach that allows for an examination of his artistic production in relation to a variety of economic forums, for example, the ecological parameters of an emerging environmental consciousness, the congressional debate over that activity, the corporate mind-set of the mining industry that helped determine those debates, as well as other visual culture that took on significance within the horizon of those expectations.²¹ In that sense, Chapter One and its excavation or detailed textual exposition of the Smithson literature, though sufficient in its framework, also conceals as much as it tells. In other words, it does not address the aesthetic import of Smithson's s(p)oil-as-trophies, within other institutional practices that were also looking for ways to restabilize the economic ramifications of over a century of capitalist development.

The artist/patron relationship is seldom an easy fit, but without it, as Smithson posits, "the types of critical boundaries . . . that exist by themselves removed from what surrounds them . . . tend to isolate the art object into a metaphysical void, independent from the external relationships such as *land, labor and class*." It is a type of "freedom [the artist viewed as] metaphysical or in art critical terms, *aesthetic*."²² Taking his lead, subsequent chapters view Smithson's art in its capacity for renegotiating what by the 1960s was becoming anachronistic for a growing number – cultural views of the contemporary landscape as if a Garden of Eden, even if occupied by the machine. Each subsequent chapter looks at the artist's writings and his art's significance as an achievement within other political and/or economic habits wanting an environmental facelift. Each chapter repositions the theoretical parameters established in Chapter One – an image of Smithson's earthworks as a postmodern strategy of containment in its own right – in terms of their hegemonic compatibilities with a shifting horizon of contested norms, values, and attitudes that surfaced from within the particularities of what can conveniently be called here the secondary wave, or "new conservationism," of an environmental movement.

Chapter Two looks at how the artist's series of nonsites and travelogues from the 1960s came to constitute a useful cultural analog for mining the earth and the mining industry's own instabilities in the ambivalent ecopolitics of the late 1960s. The itinerary of Chapter Three looks at the shift in location that occurred when Smithson

came to see his output from the 1960s as structurally too nearsighted, caught as it was within the institutional confinement of the museum space. It also looks at what happened when his aesthetic narratives of geoeconomic confinement moved away from the privatized world of the museum space. Additionally, Chapter Three looks at Smithson's aesthetics of ambivalence in ways that realign his art within the tensions of an emerging civil unrest confronting a corporate society – the successes and defeats that took shape within the “new conservationist” movement. The class specifics of Smithson's artistic activity are, throughout, pursued in terms of how the artist conflated two voices: one representing the economics of mining and the other representing the changing ecological demands of those who, although directly benefiting from industrial profits, were finding it harder and harder to manage the multiple effects of their economic activity. A critical part of this view is the bureaucratic parameters that helped shape the issues of environmental preservationism within the notion of waste prevention.

When many still saw civic disobedience as a useful practice in the shifting power relations of the early 1970s, Smithson began to focus in on a more context-specific aesthetics of entropic geological confinement, contending, “There is no point in trying to transcend . . . industry, commercialism, and the bourgeoisie.”²³ It was a change of direction that would mean the development of reclamation projects and for those whose use of the land supported a particular economic way of life. In turn, the chapter examines how the competing desires of his expanded audience played a crucial role in the shape that artistic shift took.

The final chapter is meant to be the beginnings of a critical account of the artist's less than successful attempts to manage the corporate mind-set's own versions of overburden – the latter's refusal to incorporate into the economics of mining the maintenance of the non-profitable material the industry abandons in its use of our landscape.²⁴ As an ideological springboard to help sell his flagging reclamation park proposals the artist ultimately turned to the huge civic public relations program generated by the National Parks Centennial of 1972 and the ecological openings generated from within its concept of wilderness. The intent of Chapter Four is to look at how Smithson used this forum to reposition his reclamation proposals within the ongoing and slow-moving ecological negotiations that were occurring in the democratic

corridors of Congress. Unfortunately – due in part to the artist’s tragic death in 1973 – these proposals were left unresolved.

With the habits of economics always a part of artistic practice, and ambivalence a necessary factor in my acceptance of that, the basic issue of this book comes down to this: What do I make of the aesthetic “work” structured into the very forms of Smithson’s art? The post-modern positions have split it into idealized forms of deconstructive resistance or postsemiotic forms of transcending the economic. This book wagers differently. In appreciating civic habits as a fundamental presence of significant creativity, this book looks at how the long-standing aesthetic conventions of the picturesque-sublime became as useful a resource for Smithson’s landscapes as the contested ambivalence that shaped the “new conservationist” movement was for his geoeconomic versions of entropic confinement.

More to the point of the wager, although my theoretical framework relies on a set of methodological guidelines for recognizing how our past reproduced its desires through a range of cultural fields, this book does not assume that its narrative of earthworks is untouched by current desires. Art historical narratives are always, and in significant ways, an extension of those participating in the production, emergence, management, and/or promotion of cultural values. In that sense, this book will be a sociology of art – but not if that means a philosophical framework whose methodological articulations assumes some founding totality in an attempt to domesticate the past. This examination of the art by Smithson is assumed as a performative act, as a participant in a range of social fabrics always mediated by a complex web of normative factors, some controllable, others not. In similar fashion, this book takes Smithson at his word, yet without underestimating the internal ideology of his artistic success. In turn, my historical account is more like a civicology of earthworks – a history caught within the arbitrariness of the cultural framework currently defining the concept of nature, the earth’s limits, and our meaningful place within. In turn, my conceptual grasp of the historical vanishing point relies on those who have helped build a critical sense of an historical “other” (the past) as always already folded within the politics of archival practice. I am also indebted to those who have developed a strong case for a semiotics of difference and the belief that with all things being equally different, complexity is perhaps the most ethical.

If there is meaning in difference, its significance is always-already in the articulation of that difference.

The intent here is to situate Smithson's earthworks within what has become the more current socially fixed ecocratic semiotics of sustainable development while positioning both in the vanishing point of the "new conservatism" that took root in the 1960s. With sustainable development currently articulated as our ecological starting point, Smithson's containment of the body politic that shaped the early formation of that federal land management policy will be, in part, my response to the current state of affairs. My view of his art as an archive of cultural capital is also meant to be a useful reminder of what continues to be excluded from the conceptual boundaries of visual culture in the United States – if not also a testament to what artistic activity can be viewed as. Art and its responses are important practices and, in variety of ways, fundamental in our society, for both function to re-present us to ourselves. But I also believe that because we live in an hegemonic terrain of overburden, art and its celebration continues to be an ideological process (arbitrary conventions practiced as if natural) with capital legislating the very structure of that process – that is, as if not.

This book does not claim to use some new, sounder methodological procedure for s(t)imulating the past. I value the theoretical parameters of historical materialism because of its provisional sense of itself. I rely on its relational model of signifying practices and do so in viewing the "past" as a form of unconsolidated historical overburden – an image of history folded within a contested and uncertain present. My disagreements with the current site specifics that have been established in the celebration of Smithson's earthworks is meant to challenge that horizon of expectation to include a political economy extracted from the discourse. In addition, the hope is that this book is not seen as a more critically calibrated version of art appreciation or, for that matter, a revisionist history of earthworks in the sense of being a collection of different more truthful *facts* and as such establishes the book's historical credentials. Unless, that is, fact here is understood to include its more etymological sense of something *made* – as a mode of production.²⁵ If my account of earthworks can stand in as part of a civic truth, it does so as part of the conventions that helped manufacture it. These issues have a direct impact on the type

of art history written and should not be dismissed lightly. So how does one recapitulate the significance in the art by Smithson as if a political economy *in* material forms, when after a quarter-century of art historical narratives a sense of his earthworks' significance continues to be celebrated otherwise? I let the substance of the book act as one appropriate response.